

A searing reminder of climate change; Despite proof of dire conditions, Australia's policy remains the same

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Body

Michèle Pearson Clarke is Toronto's photo laureate for the next three years. Each month, she takes a different photo and talks about why it's important to the city and why you should take a look at it.

Australia has been burning since September, but on the last day of the last decade, the apocalypse finally arrived. After nearly two months of shooting the bushfire crisis, that's what it felt like for Sydney photojournalist Matthew Abbott as he watched fire destroy the small town of Lake Conjola, New South Wales.

As the rest of us were grinding 2019 to a close, Abbott tweeted this photograph of a burning house and a fleeing kangaroo, which has since gone somewhat viral.

Published on the front page of the New York Times on New Year's Day, this image has appeared in countless newspapers since, and has also been shared on Instagram by the likes of Greta Thunberg and newly favourite-son royal couple, Prince William and Duchess Kate.

But this is just one of hundreds of horrifying photographs that have appeared in print and online, and on social media since that apocalyptic turn in Australia on New Year's Eve. Australians have been suffering through the end of the world and the world has been watching.

We've now seen photographs of blazing red skies and burning buildings and helicopters dropping water bombs and fire tornadoes and singed koala bears and exhausted firefighters and livestock burnt alive. Of forests ablaze and smoking ruins and bereft communities and blackened parkland and navy evacuations and raining ash and people huddled on the sand and in the sea, and that one shockingly and perfectly charred tiny baby kangaroo.

Over and over, journalists have turned to the word "apocalypse" to try to make sense of the overwhelming experience of looking at these images.

Given the unprecedented scale and scope of devastation depicted, there have also been repeated assertions that surely this is a turning point, that these photographs offer incontrovertible proof that climate change is real and that we need to take drastic action to reduce carbon emissions and save the planet.

And yet, at the time of writing, Australia's conservative government is sticking firmly to its abysmal climate policy. According to the 2020 Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), out of 57 evaluated countries Australia is the worst-performing country on climate change policy and ranks sixth worst overall.

Australia also happens to be the world's fourth largest coal producer and the world's largest exporter of coal and liquefied natural gas. And in terms of emissions, coal happens to be the most harmful fossil fuel, producing more greenhouse gases than any other electricity source.

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Commissioned by the then Labor government, a 2008 report examining the impact of climate change on Australia makes the link explicitly clear, specifying that "fire seasons will start earlier, end slightly later and generally be more intense. This effect increases over time, but should be directly observable by 2020."

Directly observable, indeed. And these catastrophic fires were directly, observably fuelled by Australia's hottest and driest year on record, with the mean temperature 1.52 C above average and the annual rainfall 40 per cent below average in 2019.

As Captain Obvious as this all seems, Scott Morrison's Liberal government is no singular villain ostrich. The CCPI also reports that 12 out of 25 major emitting countries are still not on track to achieve the greenhouse gas mitigation targets they set for themselves, yes, including Canada, despite similar terrifying photographs of the 2016 wildfire disaster in Fort McMurray circulating nationally.

Spoiler alert: Canada ranks seventh worst on the CCPI, just one spot above Australia.

So what will it take? What do we need to see to urge us toward radical climate action?

Environmental activists and researchers have long struggled with this question, knowing that images can and do have the capacity to shift attitudes and behaviours toward climate change.

Since 2013, we've seen the median percentage of people who view climate change as a major threat rise from 56 to 67 per cent, and undoubtedly photographs have made a contribution to this increase.

Climate change, however, is distinctly challenging to represent visually. As an extremely complex and often abstract phenomenon, it resists traditional photographic capture as key processes such as emitting gases, acidifying oceans and rising temperatures remain invisible to us.

Most of the images we see portray distant impacts rather than causes or solutions and, even then, the temporal and geographical lag between causes and effects make it difficult for any single image to act as definitive visual evidence of what author and Princeton professor Rob Nixon has termed the "slow violence" of the climate crisis.

But after two decades of seeing mostly melting glaciers and stranded polar bears and billowing smokestacks, the Oxford-based think tank Climate Outreach is suggesting a way forward.

In 2016, it launched Climate Visuals, "the world's only evidence-based climate change photography resource," and since then it has been working to change the visual narratives produced by photographers, environmental campaigners and media outlets, most notably the Guardian last year.

Based on its research, it has developed seven core principles to mobilize public engagement through climate imagery, with the first and most important being "show real people."

To date, climate change has largely been represented as something damaging to the environment and nature and wildlife, and the Climate Visuals team is now advocating a shift toward communicating the impact on humans, as well the actions people are taking to deal with and fight this emergency.

Though we don't see any people in the photograph above, the effectiveness of this approach is reflected in the considerable discussion about how some of the photos documenting the Australian fires have resonated more deeply than images in the past, particularly the pictures of people taking refuge on the beaches of Mallacoota or seeking escape by boat that same night.

Those are photographs of terrible human suffering, and I find it hard to accept that this is what we need to see to compel us into a meaningful response. And as much as I believe in the power of images, maybe we need to recognize that when it comes to climate change, photography is just simply limited in its ability to influence decisions and galvanize action.

We must keep looking, but not everything can be seen.

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